



PATRICK TESTIN STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: Investing in Your Health Care

There's a saying in Madison that on inauguration day, you're sworn in, and every day thereafter you're sworn at. Fortunately for me, I've found that that expression is greatly exaggerated for humorous effect. There are other expressions and phrases that get thrown around in the capitol that I don't think are a laughing matter. One such term is "outstate Wisconsin." This term refers to the two-thirds of the state that aren't in the southeastern corner or the Fox River Valley. It's the part of the state that we call home, and we're as much a part of Wisconsin as Milwaukee, Madison, or Green Bay. We're proud of our tightly knit communities, and we have much to offer.

To keep our communities strong, they have to be able to provide for the needs of the population. Health care access, always an important issue, is becoming more important as the baby boomer generation enters their golden years. Currently, we are facing a shortage of medical professionals in rural Wisconsin that if left unaddressed, could become a serious problem in the coming years. That's why I'm working with my colleagues in the Rural Wisconsin Initiative to shine a spotlight on the issue of rural health care access. In March, I co-authored two bills that will work to directly address these shortages.

The first piece of legislation, known as the REACH (Rural Education for Advanced Clinicians in Health Care) Act, provides \$1.5 million over the biennium to hospitals and clinics for the training of Advanced Practice Clinicians. The training would aid in the development a number of practitioners, including frontline medical professionals like physician assistants and advanced practice nurses. Over 80% of Wisconsin counties currently have hospital vacancy rates for advanced practice clinicians of over 10%. This bill, which I am co-authoring with Rep. Romaine Quinn (Rice Lake), gives hospitals and clinics the tools they need to maintain and grow their workforce so that they can meet the needs of the people in their communities.

The second bill is also aimed at increasing the health care workforce by encouraging the establishment of training consortia for allied health professionals. These are the physical therapists, radiographers, nutritionists, and dental hygienists that make up 60% of the health care workforce. The legislation, which I've co-authored with Rep. Ed Brooks (Reedsburg) and Sen. Howard Marklein (Spring Green), would provide half a million dollars over the next two years in matching grants for hospitals that partner with educational institutions to train up the next generation of rural health care professionals.

Both of these bills have attracted bi-partisan support in the Assembly and the Senate, and I hope that we can start to move them through the legislative process soon – because we need to make sure that all of Wisconsin continues to move forward.